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Libya-Chad: Qadhafi's Next Moves

Summary

Libyan leader Qadhafi's current crisis with Washington probably will delay--but not deter--his pursuit of a more aggressive military posture in Chad. The level, pace, and timing of Libyan military activities will be determined by Qadhafi's assessment of possible French and US reactions and other foreign policy priorities. [REDACTED]

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When he again devotes his full attention to Chad, Qadhafi most likely will choose small-scale incursions by mixed groups of Chadian rebels and Libyan forces. Such an approach would test local and international political support for Chadian President Habre as well as military capabilities of Habre's troops and Chadian dissidents. In our view, Qadhafi would accelerate his timetable for such action if he decided that Paris' preoccupation with legislative elections in March precluded a French military reaction. [REDACTED]

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Qadhafi probably also would try to exploit any uncertainties in Paris over his next moves to extract political concessions that would weaken French support for Chadian President Habre. Qadhafi's actions also would be affected by his perception that a large-scale attack heightens the risk of a French military response. In any case, Qadhafi is not likely to do anything to escalate the military situation until he is reasonably confident that the current confrontation with Washington is behind him. [REDACTED]

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This memorandum was prepared by [REDACTED] the Maghreb Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 23 January 1986 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be directed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, [REDACTED].

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[redacted]

Libyan efforts to rebuild its eroding military position in Chad began in mid-1985 after the visit to Chad of several senior military officials. Their trip was quickly followed by the appointment of Colonel Abd al-Hafiz Mas'ud, one of Qadhafi's chief military advisers, as Libyan commander in Chad. Mas'ud immediately initiated a program designed to repair Libyan relations with Chadian dissident groups, which had been strained by Tripoli's reluctance to provide them with food, fuel, vehicles, and ammunition. He also began strengthening Libya's own forces in the north, which had been plagued by poor morale and logistic and maintenance difficulties. [redacted]

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Mas'ud was replaced last October by Colonel Ali Sharif--the most experienced of Libya's Chad commanders. Sharif's arrival, in our view, signaled initial preparations for renewed Libyan-supported military action. Since October [redacted]

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[redacted] more frequent reconnaissance flights over southern Chad and the arrival of fresh Libyan troops and newly trained Chadian rebels to northern Chad. [redacted]

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[redacted] construction was completed at Ouadi Doum airfield, providing Tripoli with an initial capability to send fighter aircraft deep into southern Chad, including N'Djamena. Ouadi Doum also is serving as Libya's main logistics base in Chad, handling several transport aircraft daily. [redacted]

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[redacted] equipment, including armored vehicles and air defense missiles, has been moved into northern Chad as recently as this month. [redacted]

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Libyan Political Objectives

Qadhafi almost certainly regards a pro-Libyan government in N'Djamena as key to destabilizing other moderate governments in sub-Saharan Africa. [redacted]

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Libya is working to create a network for subversion in northern Nigeria, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and Niger. In addition, Qadhafi probably believes a pro-Libyan government in N'Djamena would ensure Libyan access to the uranium resources of northern Chad. Foreign survey teams reportedly are continuing to survey uranium resources in this region. [redacted]

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Heightened discontent inside Libya probably has also increased Qadhafi's concern that the United States, France, or Algeria may try to use northern Chad as a base for stirring unrest among tribesmen in the Libyan province bordering Chad--an area traditionally resistant to government control. Qadhafi apparently expressed his concern over the possibility of increased US involvement in Chad during his talks with French President Mitterrand in Crete in September 1984. [redacted]

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[redacted] Public statements by Libyan Foreign Secretary Turayki at about the same time indicated that Libya's reneging on its troop withdrawal agreement with France in part was motivated by its perception that a Libyan withdrawal would open the door to Habre's recapture of northern Chad--an event Turayki implied would pose a security threat to southern Libya. [redacted]

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[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] Qadhafi's 25X1

ambitions in Chad are conditioned by his determination to break what he regards as Libya's "encirclement" by pro-US regimes. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] Qadhafi's satisfaction with the status of Libyan 25X1

influence in increasingly nonaligned Sudan has prompted his heightened interest in subverting N'Djamena. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

Qadhafi recently told a group of Libyan military officers that Libya's longer term objectives in Chad also include securing access to water resources of Lake Chad. Qadhafi in part probably is only trying to undercut arguments by nationalist Libyan officers that Qadhafi's ambitions in Chad are unrelated to Libyan interests. On the other hand, Qadhafi's public statements over the past year repeatedly emphasize his belief--probably stemming from his Bedouin upbringing--that control over water resources is the key to domination in various regions. [redacted] 25X1

When Will Qadhafi Strike?

Libyan military action any time soon is by no means certain, despite the continued strengthening of forces in Chad. In our view, a more aggressive Libyan military posture will only be initiated when Qadhafi becomes personally engaged because he recognizes that any miscalculation might prompt French military retaliation. Competing demands on him for decisions involving Libyan support for terrorism and subversion in other regions, as well as his sense of political opportunities or threats from foreign and domestic enemies might again distract him for a lengthy period as it has in the past. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] Qadhafi already has postponed military action 25X1

in Chad because he was shaken by the killing of his cousin and confidant, Hassan Ashkal, by unknown assailants last November. [redacted] 25X1

In our view, Qadhafi would speed up his timetable for military action if he decided that Mitterrand's preoccupation with French legislative elections next March minimized the chances of a French military response. The Libyan leader probably also would consider moving sooner if there were clear indications that French conservatives--perhaps more inclined to challenge Libya--were strengthening their prospects for gaining power in Paris. [redacted] 25X1

Likely Course of Fighting

When Qadhafi gives the go ahead, we believe that military action will initially result in probing attacks by mixed groups of Chadian rebels and Libyans against government positions. Such incursions would be similar to last December's probe at Koro Toro, which resulted in a brief shootout with government forces. Such attacks would be designed to keep Habre off balance and stretch N'Djamena's already limited forces. In our view, they also would be intended to achieve quick, morale-raising

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victories and help Qadhafi assess the effectiveness of his own force in Chad. [REDACTED]

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These limited encounters involving Libyan backed rebels also provide Qadhafi with a barometer to test French intentions. He began feeling out French reactions by ordering overflights of Chadian government positions and briefly deploying SU-22 fighter aircraft to Ouadi Doum airfield last October--and Paris responded with a temporary augmentation of troops and aircraft in neighboring Central African Republic. Qadhafi probably has drawn additional comfort from recent statements by Mitterrand that France has no defense agreement with Chad and is not the "policeman" of Africa. [REDACTED]

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A failure by Paris to immediately and decisively signal its resolve probably would prompt additional attacks, which could escalate in scope and intensity. We believe that France would have to return forces to Chad or conduct a limited air strike on Libyans and Chadian rebels to deter Qadhafi from continuing to increase military pressure on Habre. [REDACTED]

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In the absence of French military intervention or an unexpectedly strong response by Habre's forces, Tripoli might become more open in its involvement in rebel attacks south of the 16th parallel. We anticipate initially the use of Libyan SF-260 light strike aircraft and as many as two battalions of armor or artillery. The taking of isolated government positions or seizure of territory might temporarily satisfy Qadhafi if he perceives that Habre's political position had thereby been weakened enough to stimulate coup plotting against him. We believe that Qadhafi might also consider moves such as relocating the rebel "capital" from Bardai in the Aouzou Strip to a captured government stronghold in an effort to underscore Habre's defeat. [REDACTED]

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A decision by Qadhafi to adopt a more aggressive posture--including a march on N'Djamena--would again depend on his assessment of likely French reactions. Qadhafi almost certainly recognizes that the vulnerability of Libyan forces to French attack would make such an offensive extremely risky. At the same time, he would have to weigh the impact of French military action and even a limited defeat of his forces on his already deteriorating domestic position. [REDACTED]

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If Qadhafi becomes convinced that the French will not intervene, we believe the Libyan force in Chad will signal its intentions before it undertakes such an invasion. The force does not yet have the strength it achieved during the final stages of its invasion in 1983, when the deployment of French troops to Chad prompted a ceasefire. Based on preparations for the 1983 invasion, we believe that Qadhafi is unlikely to launch a major offensive without strengthening Libyan air defenses and deploying fighter aircraft to northern Chad. He also probably will augment Libya's approximately 20 tank transporters there with about 80

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more. [REDACTED]

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Political Maneuvering Likely

Qadhafi at each stage of military activity will review his diplomatic options. The strengthening of Libyan forces in northern Chad has already been accompanied by political posturing. For example, Qadhafi's visits to Senegal and Mali in late November and early December were accompanied by public and private hints that he was receptive to a negotiated settlement with Habre. [REDACTED]

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In our view, Qadhafi will periodically play his diplomatic cards to try to exploit any reluctance by Mitterrand to confront Libya militarily in Chad. We believe Qadhafi probably hopes the French can be persuaded to reduce their support for Habre in exchange for an agreement by Tripoli to at least temporarily forego additional military action. In our judgment, Qadhafi believes backtracking by Paris on its support would seriously undercut Habre's authority and international prestige, and possibly prompt coup plotting in N'Djamena. [REDACTED]

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In the event of a French attack on Libyan and rebel positions, we believe Qadhafi will focus his diplomacy on obtaining international condemnation of Paris and regional acquiescence in a "peacekeeping" force comprising mainly Libyans. Such maneuvering would be intended to legitimize the continued presence of Libyan forces north of the 16th parallel while making it difficult for Paris to justify additional attacks. He might also retaliate by targeting French personnel and facilities for terrorist attacks; the Libyans recently threatened to promote terrorism on French soil to deter Paris from supporting US efforts to increase pressure on Libya. [REDACTED]

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Implications for the United States

Qadhafi will be watching for indications of US willingness to step in for the French in Chad if Libya and the rebels defeat government forces. A US refusal to intervene, in our judgment, would encourage Qadhafi's aggressiveness by convincing him that Washington is unwilling to counter Libyan expansionism directly. A more assertive reaction from Washington probably would prompt Qadhafi to slow down his timetable for subversion in Chad. Qadhafi will not abandon his attempts to install a pro-Libyan government in N'Djamena, however, anticipating that Washington, and Paris, will decide at some point that the price of supporting Habre is unacceptably high. [REDACTED]

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